

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE MIDWAY AND WAKE ISLANDS

BY ALFRED M. BAILEY

On March 14, 1913, George Willett and I spent the day on Sand and Eastern Islands of the Midway Group, observing birds and liberating a few Laysan Rails (*Porzana palmeri*) and Laysan Finches (*Telespiza cantans*) which we had captured on Laysan Island. Previous plantings of these birds had been made. The two species thrived there for many years following our visit.



FIG. 1. Almost fully fledged young White-tailed Tropic-bird (*Phaethon lepturus*) in nest in broad crotch of ironwood tree (*Casuarina* sp.) about ten feet above ground. Photographed on Sand Island, in the Midway Group, on November 22, 1949, by Alfred M. Bailey.

When R. J. Niedrach and I visited the Midways from May 4 to 11, 1949, however, we looked in vain for these rails and finches. They apparently had been exterminated by rats which had escaped from ships during the last war. We saw no unusual birds on that visit except a few flying White-tailed Tropic-birds (*Phaethon lepturus*).

While returning to Honolulu from Australia later that year I again visited the Midways, arriving November 21. By that date both the Laysan Albatross (*Diomedea immutabilis*) and Black-footed Albatross (*D. nigripes*) had returned to Sand Island and many of the latter had eggs, but I did not see eggs of the former until I visited Eastern Island on November 23. Along the Sand Island plane runways I saw many Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) and American Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*), and on Eastern Island about a dozen Bristle-thighed Curlews (*Numenius tahitiensis*) and four Wandering Tattlers (*Heteroscelus incanus*).

In ironwoods (*Casuarina* sp.) near my headquarters on Sand Island many Hawaiian Terns (*Anous minutus*) were nesting. In an ironwood, about ten feet above ground, I found a nearly full grown young White-tailed Tropic-bird sitting in its nest. I made a point of noting that the bill of the young bird was yellowish; that of the young Red-tailed Tropic-bird (*P. rubricauda*) is black. The nest was a bare crotch about ten or twelve inches wide, more or less surrounded by upright stubs (see Fig. 1). The tree was about a foot and a half in diameter at its base.

In the harbor I tried to collect a loon (*Gavia*), but it was so wild that I could not even get close enough to tell what species it was.

Navy Photographer Harold Fawcett told me that several Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) had been seen repeatedly on the island the preceding mid-June and that he had photographed one of them after it had been captured. I inspected this photograph but could not be sure which of the several possible geographical races the bird represented.

I visited Wake from May 11 to 15, 1949. The main island was nearly devoid of bird-life at that time. The only birds I saw were a few American Golden Plovers. I searched for Wake Rails (*Rallus wakensis*) but did not find any, and was told that none had been seen since the reoccupation of the island by Americans. Rats, or possibly the starving Japanese troops themselves, may have exterminated them.

I was deeply interested in a Japanese military officer's diary found among the war ruins. When the diary was written some four thousand Japanese were being subjected to daily air attacks by the Americans, and they were cut off from all supplies. Almost every entry was on the subject of food, a typical one being: "The diet has been reduced again. I'm sick and tired of it. A formation of eight bombers hit the island."

Another entry was: "Pay day. What good is money? It all goes into savings. Private Ikeda was put in jail for eating 16 cans of meat. He was tortured by cutting down his diet until he died today. Exchanging life for only 16 cans of meat. O God! save our soul! He was one of the healthy fellows in our squad. Otori [Wake] is a dangerous island."

The entry for July 31 was: "Many enlisted men dying of starvation. One patrol plane."

Considering the terrible times the soldiers were having, I marvelled at the following entry: "August 22. Two night alarms and one day. The enemy seems to know how to harass us. What a life! An order has just come out forbidding us to catch gooney birds [albatrosses] lest they be wiped out."

The efforts of this officer to protect the 'gooney birds' must have been largely in vain. Most of the birds were destroyed by the starving soldiers, although a great colony of Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) was guarded so that the eggs could be gathered regularly. The Sooty Tern colony on Peale Island (of the Wake Group) was the largest I had ever seen. On May 14 I saw thousands of birds on their eggs. The downy young were beginning to hatch on that date.

A few Man-o'-war-birds (*Fregata magnificens*) were sitting about on the rusted iron skeletons of bombed naval buildings. Small groups of Noddy Terns (*Anous stolidus*) were nesting in the dwarfed trees known locally as bukas (*Pisonia grandis*). I saw two White-tailed Tropic-birds. It was apparent that the bird population had suffered from the Japanese occupation for, aside from what I have just mentioned, there were no birds. We did not see any boobies (*Sula*), Red-tailed Tropic-birds, or albatrosses. A search for such burrow-nesting birds as petrels and shearwaters was out of the question, for my time was so short. I saw nothing of either.

DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, DENVER, COLORADO

NEW LIFE MEMBER

Olive Ruth Spencer grew up on a farm in Adams County, Illinois. All her life she has been interested in out-of-door things, especially birds and plants. She did her undergraduate work at Wheaton College and took her master's degree (in biology) at the University of Michigan. She spent five summers at the University of Michigan Biological Station, making, while there, a life history study of the Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) on which she reported in *The Wilson Bulletin* in 1943. Miss Spencer has taught biology in the Moline (Illinois) High School for the past 23 years, having been head of the department since 1935. Preparing specimens found dead by her students and herself, she has built up a useful collection of birdskins. She is a member of the American Ornithologists' Union, the Illinois Audubon Society, and the Tri-City Bird Club.

